

An Interview with IRWA International President

Mary Anne Marr, SR/WA



When you spend some time with Mary Anne, you begin to notice a common theme. Being “part of something bigger” is what originally attracted her to a career in infrastructure real estate. It is also what she believes is the greatest benefit of being an IRWA member. More recently, Mary Anne has become focused on IRWA’s higher purpose, which is bringing quality of life to communities everywhere through infrastructure development.

Crediting her employer’s support for her personal and professional growth, Mary Anne imagines a day when more employers will urge their staff to pursue leadership roles in the Association. It’s just common sense. After all, when employees receive the tools, training and support they need to develop as leaders, doesn’t this benefit the employer as well?

BY BARBARA BILLITZER

How did you first get started in right of way?

It was actually an IRWA class that led me down this pathway. It was over 20 years ago, and I still remember that experience. At the time, I was working as a commercial real estate appraiser and didn't know much about IRWA. I needed to get up to speed on appraising partial interests, so I signed up for The Appraisal of Partial Acquisitions in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It was instructed by David Burgoyne, SR/WA and he really brought the subject matter to life. I was so excited about what I had learned that when the class was finished, I knew without a doubt that this was what I wanted to do. Shortly after, I joined IRWA and then within a year, I began working at Consumers Energy. That one class changed the entire course of my career!

You have volunteered much of your time to IRWA. What do you find most rewarding?

There have been so many wonderful experiences. One of my favorites is the SR/WA Recognition Breakfast that's held at the conference every year. As I watch a host of new SR/WAs walking the stage to receive their certificates, I take great pride in their academic achievement. It shows that they are each dedicated to learning and committed to ongoing professional development. And this strengthens our collective voice.

What led you to become involved in IRWA leadership?

Like most, I first got involved at the Chapter level. Seeing all the amazing opportunities to make a difference, I knew that this was something I wanted to be a part of. Along the way, I found myself working with some remarkable people, and I always felt like I belonged. Joining the International Electric Utilities Committee was one of the best decisions I made, as it showed me the kind of impact our work has on the industry. After serving in various

Chapter roles, I became Chair of Region 5 and began attending the International Governing Council meetings. That's when I got a real sense of the commitment and dedication that our volunteer leaders have. I really never imagined myself serving as IRWA's President. It's something that just happened.

How would you describe the benefits of giving back to one's profession?

Okay, so this may sound like a cliché, but giving back makes me feel complete. Throughout my career, there are so many people who helped me by sharing information and giving advice and encouragement. They left lasting impressions, and I believe their support has helped me to become a better person and a more effective leader. If I am able to help even just one member to learn and grow, then this impact will carry forward with them.

As part of the IEC, what has been your biggest challenge to date?

Collectively, we have so much we want to accomplish. But with such a relatively short time to serve, accepting the reality that we can't do everything all at once is difficult. And because the IRWA is a dynamic organization and our industry is continually changing, it's been challenging to prioritize. But focusing our time and energy where we see the biggest impact is critical to our success. So even though it can be a difficult balance, with the support of the International Governing Council and IRWA staff, we are able to set the stage for our future and adjust as needed.

As President, what are some of your most immediate priorities?

Education has always been a top priority, and I'm pleased to say that we now have a clear path forward with our industry-specific credentialing pathways. And the response has been overwhelmingly

positive. The CLIMB Instructor Development program—first launched in January—got such a favorable response that we have now scheduled another one in November so that we can meet the demand. I plan to support more of these efforts over the coming year, especially as we begin promoting our new education products to key industries.

Reinforcing and growing our partnership with IRWA's Young Professionals group is another priority. That means we need to develop programs and create opportunities that are relevant to them. I've learned that they not only have a great deal of energy and enthusiasm, they also bring fresh thinking to the table. They're not shy about suggesting new ways of looking at what we do. It's critical that we fully engage, support and plan for our next generation of leaders.

Taking a strategic look at how the Association is structured is another important initiative. After many discussions with members, we concluded that before embarking on any major bylaw changes, an in-depth analysis of how we are structured is needed. This will require us to look to the future, consider a global environment and remain



In 2015, Consumers Energy was awarded Employer of the Year. Brad Kabel, SR/WA, and Mary Anne accepted the award from then-President Lee Hamre, SR/WA.

“ Think about it. We improve the quality of life with every project we deliver.”



At IRWA's Congress for Global Infrastructure Real Estate, Mary Anne with Mexico Chapter 85's Jesus Rodriguez Davalos, INDAABIN's Soraya Pérez Munguía and Carlos Alberto De La Fuente Herrera, and then-International Vice President, Jerry Colburn, SR/WA.

open to new ideas. Coming up with a comprehensive plan that fully addresses the Association's internal structure will be a multi-year effort, so the sooner we start, the sooner we can envision the possibilities of what we can become.

What kind of industry challenges do you foresee over the coming years?

One of the biggest challenges I see is that we are an aging profession. Like myself, many of us have honed our skills through years of experience. I don't think we have the luxury of waiting 20 years for the next generation of professionals to gain their experience, so we need to identify new ways to help them accelerate their learning. We are stepping up to that challenge!

Our new industry-centric career path assures consistent learning in core right of way fundamentals, and combined with new course and instructor development models, provides us with the flexibility and agility needed to meet the continually changing needs of our profession.

Have you experienced a meaningful mentor relationship?

While I've never had a "formal" mentor, I have always been surrounded by people I could learn from. These interactions and relationships have influenced my way of thinking, so I guess you could consider them informal mentors.

In 2000, I had the privilege of working with an attorney at Consumers Energy by the name of Dave Barth. We first worked together on a large complex project, and since that time, he has guided me through many other transactions. When it came to writing agreements, I would literally spend hours in his office, and we would obsess over every word. For some, this might sound like torture, but for me it was pure joy! Looking back, I remember how proud I felt when Dave would respond to my inquiries saying, "That's a very good question." As he would think out loud in search of the right answer, I couldn't help but learn from him.

Dave would always remind me to never assume what the other party was thinking, and to never negotiate against yourself. Those are key lessons that I apply every single day. When he retired last year, it was probably one of the saddest times for me. But everything he taught me is now mine to share.

What led your employer to sponsor the new Course 218: Acquisition for Electric Transmission Projects?

As an employer, Consumers Energy has always invested in their employees and recognized the need for lifelong learning opportunities. Their decision to sponsor Course 218 actually stemmed from the success we experienced sponsoring a pilot for Course 225, Social Ecology the previous year.



Mary Anne and Ron have been inseparable since they first met on an infrastructure real estate project back in 2000.

We recognized the importance of supporting a new electric transmission course and the direct benefit to our employees. We invited industry peers from all across the country to participate. By having a classroom full of people working in the electric industry, we had the opportunity to go through the pilot experience together and offer our collective feedback. We learned so much from each other, and everyone contributed to improving the course content. Course modifications now include electric construction content, and we're confident our next pilot will be even better. After the upcoming pilot in Montana, we will have an update on the rollout.

IRWA just held its first Congress for Global Infrastructure Real Estate. Will its success open new doors for global expansion?

Absolutely! Our Global Congress demonstrated the unparalleled value that IRWA brings to our members and partners. Even though we may live in different countries and speak different languages, our infrastructure issues are so similar. We have so much in common. Currently, we are seeing an enormous demand for right of way education in Latin America. In fact, our Chapter in Mexico has invited us to host the next Global Congress in their country. This will help us reach a wider audience and lead to greater opportunities to impact the lives of people everywhere as we share infrastructure best practices. Through our collective experience, best practices and expansive member network, IRWA has carved out a unique role as the only organization that can facilitate these educational opportunities.

How would you describe IRWA's higher purpose?

Our higher purpose is improving peoples' quality of life through infrastructure development. This is a concept that applies on a local, national and global basis. Think about it. We improve the quality of life with every project we

deliver. In emerging countries, we do this by bringing people the basic essentials like water, electricity, roads and bridges. In more developed countries, we meet our higher purpose by creating and rebuilding infrastructure networks that reduce costs for consumers, bring new supplies to market or simply improve the reliability of current services.

As an Association, the IRWA supports this higher purpose by elevating ethics, learning and a standard of excellence within the global infrastructure real estate community. We are a diverse community representing many industries and disciplines. It is through IRWA's commitment to educational programs, the sharing of expertise and adhering to the highest ethical standards that our members will always be relied on to ensure the success of any infrastructure project.

What impact would you like to see IRWA achieve in the next five years?

Five years sounds like an eternity, but it will be here before we know it. It is my hope that the Association's perceived value will be so strong that our employers, agencies and stakeholders are fully engaged and willing to actively support IRWA initiatives. To achieve this will require us to continually revisit our value proposition. We have the ability to provide our members with increased access to information, helping to build their skills and providing their employers with tangible value. While we continually improve our products, we must also elevate our discussions beyond infrastructure real estate issues and demonstrate that we can address larger industry issues and support positive changes.

What would you say to an industry newcomer about career opportunities?

Everyday is an opportunity to learn and grow. And opportunities will come from people, projects and places you never anticipated. Whether at work or through IRWA, I encourage you to raise your

hand and volunteer. From experience, I can assure you that your fellow members want you to succeed. So regardless of what you know or what experiences you bring to the table, you need not let the fear of failure hold you back. Whatever doubts or questions you have, there's always another member close by who has your back.

What would you say is the greatest benefit of membership?

For me, it's about being part of something bigger. When you think about the combined strength of our knowledge, industry experience and specialized expertise, we represent a powerful voice. And because we are involved in infrastructure projects worldwide, that voice is being heard across the globe. It is especially gratifying to be a part of an organization that has the ability to influence and shape policies, promote high ethical standards and support educational programming. As IRWA members, we are part of a group of professionals who truly do help build a better world...together. 🌟

